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C O N F I D E N T I A L MADRID 001894

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TAGS: [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [SP](#)

SUBJECT: PARLIAMENT AUTHORIZES GOS NEGOTIATIONS WITH ETA

REF: MADRID 1859

Classified By: Political Counselor Kathy Fitzpatrick; reason 1.4 (b)

1. (U) President Zapatero won Parliamentary approval on May 17 for his plan to offer peace talks with Basque terrorist group ETA if ETA agrees to abandon the armed struggle. The initiative passed by a vote of 192 to 147, with all parties except the Popular Party (PP) accepting Zapatero's proposal. The vote authorizes "dialogue between the appropriate authorities and those who renounce the use of violence." Zapatero's plan differs little from efforts by previous Spanish governments to negotiate an end to the Basque conflict, but the exclusion of the main opposition party from the accord and the shifting political landscape in the Basque country (in PSOE's favor) made this vote a dramatic political event. Zapatero's victory renders moot a long-standing Socialist-PP accord to coordinate actions against ETA and symbolically places the Socialist Party (PSOE) in alliance with smaller leftist and nationalist parties in the fight against ETA. Though Zapatero won by a wide margin, the 2000 PP-PSOE Terrorism Pact won much more support with 313 votes in favor. The PP adamantly opposed any conciliatory gesture towards ETA and warned that Zapatero's proposal would strengthen ETA, which has been weakened by the recent arrest of numerous key leaders. The PP pointed to the fact that the vote took place just days after suspected ETA terrorists bombed four industrial sites in the Basque region as a sign of ETA's unwillingness to renounce violence (see reftel). The Association of Victims of Terrorism (AVT), a support group for victims of ETA violence, opposed the proposal and plans a June 11 demonstration in Madrid to protest the vote results.

//AN INSIDE VIEW//

2. (C) Diego Iniguez, deputy chief of staff to Vice President Maria Teresa Fernandez de la Vega, met with polcouns on May 17 and shared his insights regarding the political context of the vote. Iniguez made clear that political decisions related to the proposal were taken at the highest levels (President Zapatero, Vice President de la Vega, PSOE Parliamentary spokesman Pedro Rubalcaba, and PSOE Parliamentary leader Jose Blanco) and that planning was tightly controlled by this inner circle. Iniguez, who had partial responsibility for negotiating the support of other parties for Zapatero's proposal, said that ETA's recent decline in strength was the primary motivating factor for the GOS in undertaking this initiative at this time. It forces ETA to respond to a GOS overture from a position of weakness, perhaps making its leadership more willing to negotiate than at other points in ETA's history.

3. (C) Iniguez also ventured a political motivation for Zapatero's proposal: further isolating the PP within the Spanish political system and allowing the PSOE to consolidate its control over the political center. That suggestion seemed borne out by PSOE Spokesman Rubalcaba's post-vote comment that the PP is "using the issue of terrorism to attack the government... and has isolated itself from all other political forces in Spain." Iniguez said that polls indicated that a strong majority of Spanish citizens supported talks to end the Basque conflict (obviously an important factor in Zapatero's decision to push this issue now). He acknowledged that Zapatero was assuming a significant political risk given ETA's uncanny ability to resuscitate itself. A new spate of serious ETA attacks could give the PP political ammunition on a highly sensitive issue for Spanish voters. Iniguez argued, however, that the March 11, 2004 Madrid train bombings significantly undermined the value of murder and terrorism as a viable tool for ETA. For now, Zapatero sees little risk and strong political advantage in pursuing peace with ETA without the PP's backing.

//CHANGED BASQUE POLITICAL DYNAMIC//

4. (C) The vote on Zapatero's peace initiative took place against the backdrop of a radically changed political landscape in the Basque region. As late as mid April, the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) appeared poised to win an absolute majority in the Basque Parliament and to impose its plan to pursue a referendum on increased autonomy from Madrid. Instead, the PNV lost seats to both the PSOE and to a small Marxist-Leninist group (EHAK) backed by ETA political

front group Batasuna. As a result, the PNV has been unable to form a government, nor even to place its favored candidate as leader of the Basque Parliament. In this reduced state, the PNV had little choice but to back Zapatero's call for peace talks (on the PSOE's terms), further demonstrating that the PSOE has firmly seized the initiative in the Basque region, as well as at the national level.

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